

Chevalier de la Camara (1829–1884), first Spanish botanist in Australia

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Abstract

Chevalier de la Camara was a collector of plants in Australia in the 1870s and 1880s, and at least three species were named in his honour. However, nothing has been recorded of his life or work. In this paper as much as can be gleaned about him is set out, including his origins, birth, marriage, family, honours, botanical and agricultural activities, and death.

Introduction

Chevalier de la Camara is known as a collector of plants in Australia in the 1870s and 1880s (George 2009; AVH 2014), often as A. de la Camara, A.C. de la Camara, A. Camara or simply Camara or even Camera, but his first name and his years of birth and death are not recorded, and nothing of his life is known. Herbarium records show that he collected vascular plants (mainly dicots), bryophytes, lichens, fungi and algae in various parts of New South Wales in the 1870s and 1880s (Figs 1, 2), but nothing more has been known of him, even though at least three species have been named in his honour — a lichen, *Sticta camerae* Müll.(Arg.) (F. Müller 1882); a moss, *Polytrichum camarae* Müll.Hal. (C. Müller 1897); and a liverwort, *Plagiochila camerae* Steph. ex Dugas (Dugas 1928). Images of the types of these species can be found on the JSTOR Global Plants website (www.plants.jstor.org), and high-resolution images are available to members of participating organisations.

Of the 317 known collections in Australian herbaria (AVH 2014), 269 are undated, at least one is a geographical outlier, and only 79 have collection numbers, and of those 21 have the numbers duplicated or triplicated. There are no collections with numbers between 111 and 301, which suggests that a large number of his collections are either not in Australian herbaria or have not been databased. As a result, the utility of many of his collections for temporal and spatial analyses is limited.

In order to improve the utility of the collections and add to the knowledge of early botanical workers in Australia, this paper sets out as much as I have been able to discover about Chevalier de la Camara, including his origins, marriage, family, honours, botanical and agricultural activities, and death.

For the sake of brevity I have abbreviated some names of sources for references in the text, as follows:

- ASNSW — Acclimatisation Society of New South Wales
- AVH — Australia's Virtual Herbarium
- PROV — Public Records Office, Victoria
- SMO — Shipping Masters' Office, Sydney
- SRA — State Records Authority of New South Wales
- VR — Victorian Railways

Newspaper references, which are mostly shipping and other notices, are listed under ‘Anonymous’ except where an author can be identified.

Early life

Antonio de la Camara was born in 1829 in the town of Priego de Córdoba in south-eastern Spain, to Dolores de la Camara (née Calabres) and Roberto de la Camara, a merchant (PROV 2012a,b). Unfortunately nothing more is known of his life in Spain, but one might assume from his later life that he was well-educated and had some botanical or agricultural training, possibly at the Central (Complutense) University of Madrid, then the nearest university to his place of birth. In about 1854 he emigrated to Victoria (PROV 2012a) in the first wave of Spanish immigrants to Australia, at a time of great political and social upheaval in Spain.

The first record of him in Australia is his marriage in 1859 to an Irish emigrant, Bridget O’Brien, in Melbourne, when he was 30 years old and she was 17 (PROV 2012b). They had three children: Frances (b. 1859), Lucy (b. 1873) and Josephine Mary (b. 1875) (PROV 2012c). The birth of Frances was re-registered in 1860, presumably to avoid the stigma within the Catholic Church of pregnancy before marriage (PROV 2012c).

Some time between 1860 and 1867 the family moved to Eastern Creek, now a suburb of Sydney, where they were engaged in agriculture. In January 1867, Camara (signing himself ‘Anthony Camara’) wrote to the Acclimatisation Society of New South Wales on the cultivation and uses of ‘wild artichoke’ (*Cynara cardunculus* L.) and ‘bastard saffron’ or safflower (*Carthamus tinctorius* L.), noting that he had provided safflower blossom to Charles Moore of the Botanical Gardens in Sydney to exhibit at the Paris Exhibition (Camara 1867). It seems likely that at this time he was experimenting with plants he knew well from Spain to see if they could be introduced into commercial cultivation in Australia. A few months later he was reported to be growing safflower successfully at Eastern Creek (ASNSW 1867). Later in the same year a grower from Queensland

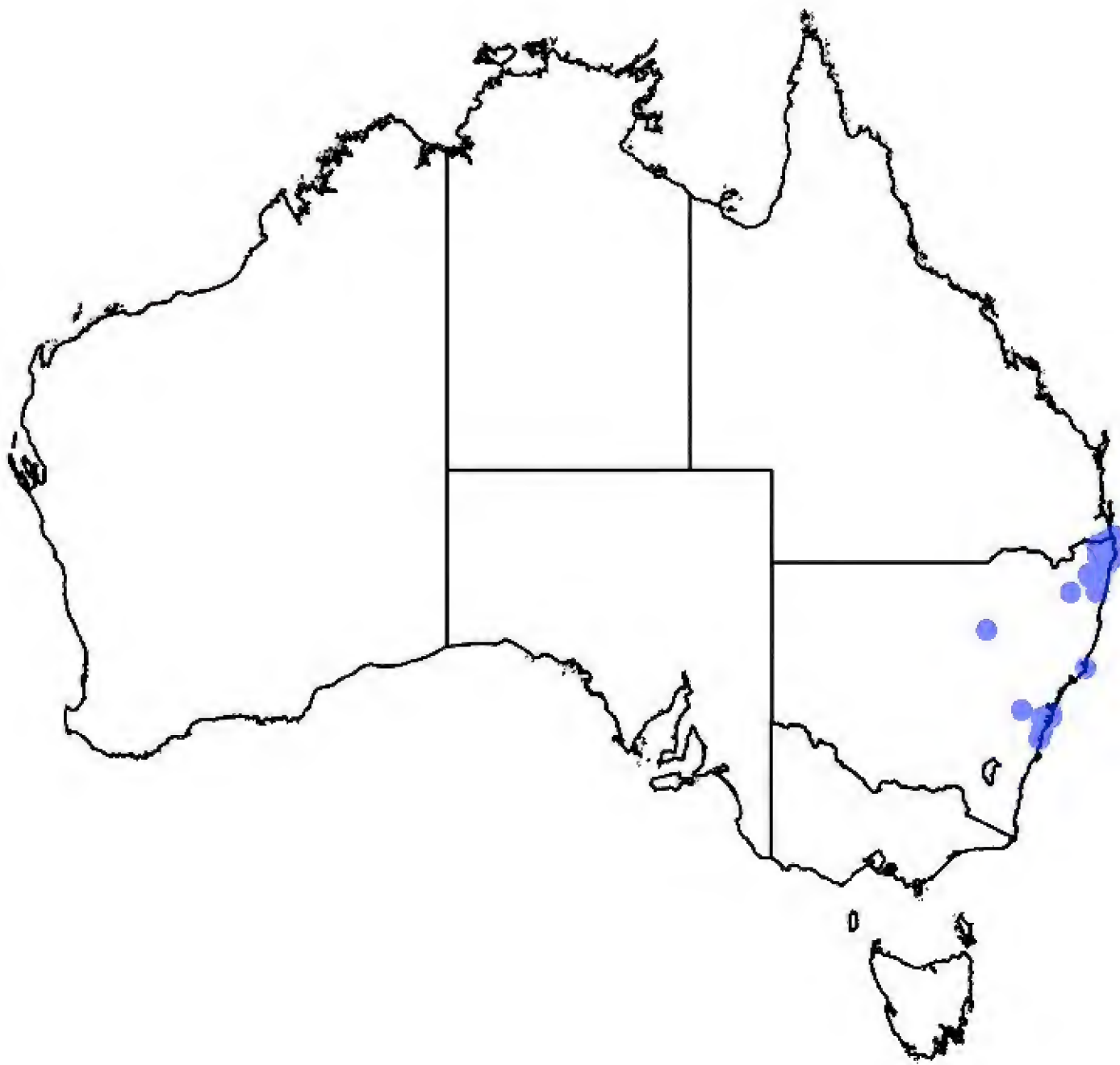


Fig. 1. Reported locations of collections lodged in Australian herbaria attributed to de la Camara. Source: AVH (2014).

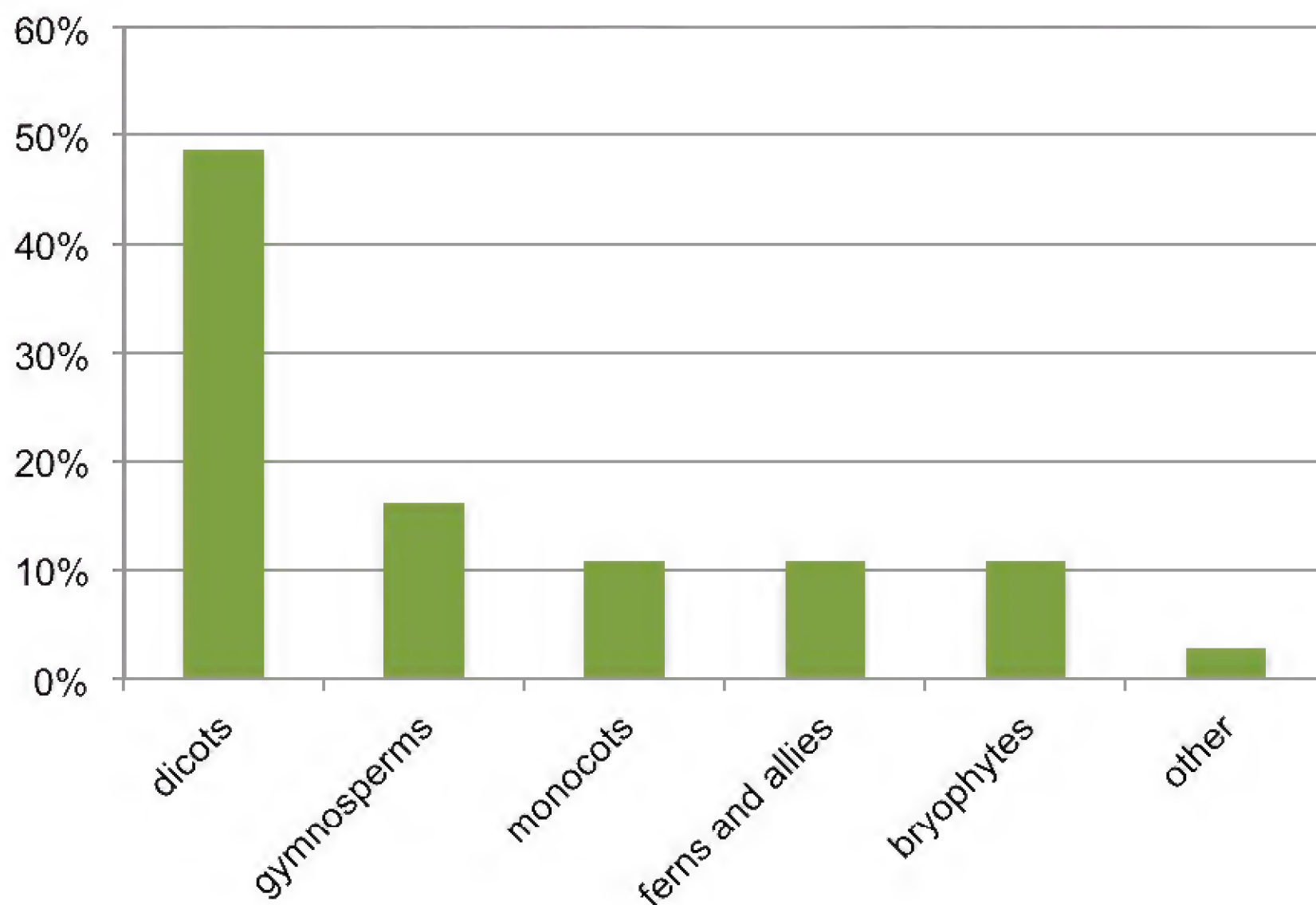


Fig. 2. Nature of collections in Australian herbaria attributed to de la Camara, by percentage of total collections. Source: AVH (2014).

reported that he had successfully raised a safflower crop from seeds supplied by ‘Mr. Camara of N.S. Wales, who imported them from Spain’, and pointed to the potential of safflower as a new and valuable export crop for Queensland (‘Fitzroy’ 1867). In the following year Camara supplied a ‘large lot of various specimens of seeds from New South Wales’ to the Botanic Gardens in Sydney (Anonymous 1868).

Soon after he returned to Melbourne, where he took up residence with his family at 29 Guildford Street, West Melbourne (now Guildford Lane in the CBD), and began once more to use his Spanish name. The *Argus* reported that ‘Don Antonio de la Camara, of this city, correspondent of the Museum of Natural Sciences in Madrid, has just had the honour conferred upon him of being elected a corresponding associate of that museum. The gratifying terms of the letter conveying the appointment enhance the value of the compliment.’ (Anonymous 1871). In the following year came the honour and title by which he would be sometimes known in the botanical literature: ‘By this mail Señor Antonio de la Camara, who has for many years been the Australian correspondent of the various learned societies in Madrid, received his decoration as Cavalier of the Royal Order of Isabel the Catholic, which has been conferred upon him in recognition of his services. As a work of art, the star with its accompanying wreath of laurel is a beautiful production. On one side are the pillars of Hercules, with the two worlds and the motto “*Plus ultra*,” and encircling it are the words “[A] *La Lealtad Acrisolada*,” or purified loyalty. On the obverse are the initials of the order on a purple ground, with the motto “*Por Isabel La Catolica*.”’ (Anonymous 1872). The motto in full means ‘To proven loyalty for Isabella the Catholic’. Unfortunately I have been unable to discover the reason that this honour was bestowed on de la Camara.

In 1875 Bridget’s brother Michael, a warden at the Beechworth Mental Asylum, died without leaving a will, and as his only next of kin in the colony she was awarded administration of his estate (O’Brien 1875).

Travels in Australia

From 1875 to 1884, and possibly as early as 1870, de la Camara made several trips to New South Wales and southern Queensland, collecting seeds and plants (Table 1). Fortunately he seems to have travelled usually, if not always, in cabin class on coastal passenger ships, so that he can be found in newspaper shipping lists.

Although steerage passengers were included in ship manifests, they were not listed in the shipping notices. In the manifests in which I have been able to find his name, it is often difficult to identify and thus is often mistranslated in shipping notices and also in the few online passenger lists available. In addition, it is possible that his name was sometimes entered incorrectly, perhaps as ‘Cameron’ or ‘Cameera’ or other variations that would make it almost impossible to identify him.

A lichen collection he made at Bulli, in the Sydney region (MEL6568A) is dated 1870 on a handwritten label. Although it is possible that he collected this specimen in 1870, the date is much earlier than his other known collections, and I cannot find any record of him travelling at this time. It may be that the date was misread from an original label, but it is impossible to verify because most of his collections are undated.

The first traceable botanical trip that he made was from March to June 1875. He left Melbourne on 9 March on the *Macedon* (Anonymous 1875a) and arrived in Sydney on 12 March (SMO 1875), leaving there for Melbourne on the same ship on 8 June (Anonymous 1875b) and arriving on 11 June (Anonymous 1875c). In January 1877 he again left Melbourne on the *Macedon* (Anonymous 1877a), arriving in Sydney on 8 January (Anonymous 1877b), then travelled on to northern New South Wales (see below) and Brisbane, returning to Sydney on 26 June (SMO 1877, SRA 2012a) and presumably from there back to Melbourne. In June of the same year he is listed as a donor of seeds to the Queensland Acclimatisation Society (Anonymous 1877c). His third trip was in 1879. On 18 March he left Melbourne on the *Barrabool* (Anonymous 1879a) and arrived in Sydney on 21 March (SRA 2012b). He then left Sydney on 20 May for Grafton on the *City of Grafton*, arriving on 22 May (Anonymous 1879a). The purpose of his visit was announced in the local Lismore newspaper:

‘Mr. Camara, an Italian Botanist, who visited this district some two years since, upon a botanizing tour, is now here again with a like object, and any person in doubt as to the name or value of any vegetable product, should not lose the present opportunity of getting it properly named or classified. Mr. Camara is anxious to secure seeds, flowers, &c., of the various Eucalypts growing in this district, or any other botanical specimens, and we shall be happy to receive anything intended for this gentleman, or give an introduction, &c.’ (Anonymous 1879c).

In July he wrote to the editor of the *Northern Star* on the commercial value of wattle bark, and noted that he was of Spanish birth, not Italian as stated in the previous article (Anonymous 1879d). During this trip he must have travelled on to Queensland, as on 1 August he embarked on the *Keilawarra* in Brisbane (Anonymous 1879e), arriving in Sydney two days later (Anonymous 1879f) and presumably sailing on to Melbourne afterwards. In that month he was again listed as a donor of seeds and plants to the Acclimatisation Society (Anonymous 1879g).

On his fourth trip he left Melbourne on the *Leura* on 5 February 1881, accompanied by one of his daughters (Anonymous 1881a), arriving in Sydney on 7 February (Anonymous 1881b). He then travelled on to northern New South Wales, and his trip was highlighted in the local press in Lismore, with his correct nationality noted:

‘We note that Chevalier Antonio de la Camara, (Spanyard), has returned to the district again, upon a botanizing tour, being now busily engaged in making a collection of sea weeds, ferns, mosses, fungi, &c., for Baron Von Mueller, for illustration in his valuable works now going through the Press, upon the vegetation of Australia. The Chevalier left Lismore, for the Tweed River, on Tuesday last, [7 June] and after spending a time there in exploring the scrubs, will return to the Richmond River for a like purpose, and any person having, or knowing anything new in the shape of orchids, &c., would do well to communicate with this gentleman, care of this office.’ (Anonymous 1881c).

On 5 June 1881 he was at Ballina, from where he wrote to Ferdinand von Mueller about an *Alsophylla* [*Cyathea*] that he had collected in the district, which he thought was different from others he had seen (de la Camara 1881). In that letter he also noted that he had sent to von Mueller ‘a case containing fungus, mosses, Algae, etc.’ He was still in the district in July (Anonymous 1881d), and it was not until 30 September that he left Sydney for Melbourne, on the *Koonoowarra* (Anonymous 1881d). Soon after he returned to Sydney on the *Leura*, leaving Melbourne on 20 November and travelling via Twofold Bay (Anonymous 1881e), arriving in Sydney on 25 November (Anonymous 1881f). He may have left Sydney for Melbourne on 13 December aboard the *Ly-ee-Moon* — a ‘Chard. D. Cameron’ (possibly a mistranslation of his handwritten name) is listed as a passenger in the outbound shipping notice — but I have not been able to find the original document (Anonymous 1881g).

Among the plants he obtained in 1881 was a moss later described by Carl Müller as a new species, *Polytrichum camarae* Müll.Hal., from ‘White Cap Mountain prope dem Richmond River: De la Camara in Hb. Melb. 1881.’ (C. Müller 1897). It is now a synonym of *Pogonatum neesii* (Müll.Hal.) Dozy. A lichen that he collected in 1881 was also a new species, named *Sticta camarae* F.Müll. (Arg.): ‘Ad Richmond River, New South Wales Novae Hollandiae: cl. Camara (ab ill. F. v. Muell. commun.)’ (Müller 1882). It is ‘an endemic epiphyte of rainforest trees in eastern Queensland and N.S.W., but still very poorly collected and little known’ (Galloway 2001).

In 1882 he was once again in Sydney. Although the date of his arrival is not known, he left Sydney on the *Coraki*, arriving at Richmond River on 28 June (Anonymous 1882b), and at Lismore on the same ship two days later (Anonymous 1882c). He left Sydney on the *Leura* on 28 November, arriving in Melbourne two days later (Anonymous 1882f). While at Richmond River in 1882, de la Camara collected a *Plagiochila* that Stephani (1882) published as a new species, *Plagiochila paucidens*, but without description and therefore illegitimate. It was later published as *Plagiochila camarae* by Dugas (1928).

At least 15 collections from Lord Howe Island in 1882 (13 in MEL, 1 in NY, 1 in G) are attributed to de la Camara, including the epiphytic moss *Pinnatella kuehliana* (Bosch & Sande Lac.) M.Fleisch. (Enroth 1994), an otherwise tropical species that has not been collected on the island since. These collections are considered in the Discussion section below.

In early 1883 de la Camara again returned to Sydney, arriving on 13 February on the *Cheviot* (Anonymous 1883a), but I have been unable to trace his movements on this trip further. He must have returned to Melbourne before April, as on 31 March his daughter Frances was married in Melbourne (Anonymous 1883b), and then returned north later in the year, as he is recorded departing from Sydney for Melbourne in the *City of Melbourne* on December 21 (Anonymous 1883c).

Herbarium records indicate that he made at least one further trip to northern New South Wales in 1884, but I can find no records of him travelling in that year. It is possible that he travelled by train to Sydney rather than by sea on this occasion, as the Melbourne–Sydney railway connection had been completed in June 1883 (VR 2014) and railway passenger records were not kept.

Table 1 Summary of de la Camara's botanical travels in Australia. Uncertain dates are in square brackets.

Period	Areas known to have been visited
[1870]	Sydney (Bulli)
1875: March – June	Sydney
1877: January – [July]	Sydney, north-eastern NSW, Brisbane
1879: March – [August]	Sydney, north-eastern NSW, Brisbane
1881: February – September	Sydney, north-eastern NSW
1881: November – December	Sydney
1882: [April] – November	Sydney, north-eastern NSW, ?Lord Howe Island
1883: February – [March]	Sydney
1883: [April] – December	Sydney
1884: months unknown	Sydney, north-eastern NSW

Death and later family history

Chevalier Antonio de la Camara died suddenly at his home in Melbourne on 5 November 1884 of heart failure (PROV 2012a), and was buried in Melbourne General Cemetery two days later (Fig. 2). His only known death notice read:

‘CAMARA. – November 5, suddenly, at his late residence, 29, Guildford-street, West Melbourne, Don Antonio de la Camara, scientific botanist.’ (Anonymous 1884).

The year of his birth on the gravestone is 1831, rather than 1829 as stated in his marriage and death certificates, but the official records must be assumed to be correct.

After his death his family moved to a single-fronted terrace house in William Street, West Melbourne, which still stands today. In March 1883 his eldest daughter Frances (Fannie) had married a well-known actor, John F. Forde, at St John's, Heidelberg (Anonymous 1883c). In September 1899 Antonio's youngest daughter, Josephine, died at the age of 24 of tuberculosis (PROV 2012e). In the same year her sister Lucy won second prize in the Civil Service Class at St. Andrew's Ladies' College, Prahran (Anonymous 1899b), but only two years later, on 2 April 1901, she too died of tuberculosis, aged 27 (PROV 2012f). Antonio's wife Bridget died on 31 August 1906 (PROV 2012d). Frances, the last surviving member of Antonio's immediate family, died on 17 May 1919 (Anonymous 1919), and her husband died on 26 May 1932 (Anonymous 1932). They were all interred in the same plot in the Melbourne General Cemetery, with Bridget's sister Honora (d. 1864) and brother Michael (d. 1875).

Discussion



Fig. 3. The grave of Antonio de la Camara and his family, Melbourne General Cemetery.

The date of collection of all 269 undated collections attributed to de la Camara can now be placed in the period 1870–1884, with a high likelihood of this being actually 1875–1884. The numbers recorded as collection numbers are probably packet numbers given to specimens sent to von Mueller, rather than field collection numbers.

It is also now possible to detect errors in the supposed localities and dates of his collections. For example, the locality to the west of all others in Figure 1 is an oddity because there is no evidence that de la Camara travelled there. This locality relates to two collections of the moss genus *Pogonatum* that he made in 1881. The handwritten locality on one packet (MEL1033390) is ‘Night Cap Mountain’, which is in the Richmond River district, but was misinterpreted by Müller in his protologue for *Pogonatum camarae* (syn. *Pogonatum neesii*) as ‘White Cap Mountain’, presumably because he thought ‘Night’ was ‘Wight’ and thus a misspelling of ‘White’. This was later interpreted to mean ‘White Top Mountain’ or ‘White Tops’, placing it far to the south-west of its actual collection locality. The same error occurred with *Pogonatum subulatum* Nees, collected at the same locality by de la Camara (MEL1032304).

The date of a collection of *Vittaria elongata* Sw. from Richmond River (MEL2155634) is given in AVH as 1886, two years after de la Camara’s death and therefore clearly an error.

In regard to the collections from Lord Howe Island attributed to de la Camara, it seems doubtful that he ever visited the island. He could not have accompanied a government commission of inquiry that went to Lord Howe Island on the government steamer *Thetis* in April 1882, as he was not mentioned as a member of the party in the official report (Wilson 1882) and was not among the passengers listed on the *Thetis* on its return to Sydney (Anonymous 1882a). Furthermore, a visit by a distinguished Spaniard would have been notable in the island’s social life because at that time visits by private individuals were rare, but there is no mention of him in the island’s history (Rabone 1972) and he is not recorded in the passenger lists of other vessels that visited the island in 1882. Although scientists visited the island again later in 1882 to observe the transit of Venus, de la Camara had by then returned to Melbourne and could not have been part of that expedition. It is possible that he obtained the Lord Howe Island specimens from John Duff, overseer of the Sydney Botanic Gardens, who accompanied the commission of inquiry and collected plants while he was on the island (Wilson 1882). The Sydney Botanic Gardens (NSW) did not at that time maintain a collection of bryophytes and lichens; in

1883 there were no bryophytes and no more than six lichens in the collection (AVH 2014). However, bryophyte and lichen collections were routinely sent to European taxonomists by Ferdinand von Mueller, who had an active interest in these groups and maintained a collection in the National Herbarium in Melbourne (MEL), which in 1883 numbered at least 30 bryophytes and 55 lichens (AVH 2014). It would be natural, therefore, for specimens in these groups to be forwarded to von Mueller, and as de la Camara was in Sydney in 1882 it would have been natural for Duff or Charles Moore to give Camara specimens to forward on to von Mueller.

The question remains as to whether there are other de la Camara collections awaiting discovery. The number of collections known in Australian herbaria seems far too few for almost a decade of collecting, and since there is one collection known in the National Herbarium of New South Wales (NSW3453) there might be more there that are yet to be databased.

From this starting point, additional information about de la Camara's activities, both botanical and agricultural, may come to light. It is clear that he imported crop seeds from Spain, and it might also be that he sent seeds and specimens of Australian plants to Spain. It might also be that he maintained a financial interest in his Eastern Creek farm after moving to Melbourne, and might have had agricultural interests in northern New South Wales that drew him there regularly. On the other hand, he might have been independently wealthy, perhaps having inherited a large estate on the death of his parents. It might also be enlightening to discover why he was appointed Cavalier of the Royal Order of Isabel the Catholic, as this might have related to his agricultural activities.

The grave of Antonio de la Camara and his family is in serious disrepair. One marble slab is collapsing, the decorative iron frame is rust-ridden, the centre strip of tiles between the two marble slabs has collapsed and is in danger of breaking up, and many of the lead letters and numbers on the inscriptions have come away from the marble slabs and are lying loose. It would be very appropriate if the botanical, theatrical and Spanish communities in Melbourne could combine to restore the grave to a condition that would honour all those who are interred there.

Acknowledgments

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- National Library of Australia
- Public Records Office Victoria
- Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne and National Herbarium of Victoria
- State Library of Victoria
- State Records Authority of New South Wales
- National Herbarium of New South Wales.

I am also very grateful to the staff at the Melbourne General Cemetery for helping to locate de la Camara's grave.

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